

# The Increasingly Important Role of Digital Influencers in Healthcare

*Co-authored by FORCE Communications & Clear Point Health*

Building successful brands in today's life sciences environment often includes thought leader (TL) partnerships. In healthcare, like in many industries, TLs and key opinion leaders (KOLs) work collaboratively with companies throughout drug development, approval, and launch to market. TLs influence their peers and other healthcare professionals (HCPs) through a variety of activities, often alongside brands, while adhering to industry guidelines.

With the rapid uptake of social media and online communications platforms, the digital TL, digital opinion leader (DOL), and digital influencer have emerged as an important consideration when building brands. Today's digital influencers are not only physicians, but patients, patients' families, advocates, nurses, nurse practitioners (NPs), physician assistants (PAs), and others who are involved in delivering or receiving healthcare. Through digital communications platforms, influencers' opinions reach their peers and other HCPs as well as patients and their families, advocacy groups, policymakers, and the public. Globally, 42% of HCPs are classified as key DOLs.<sup>i</sup> Not only do HCPs seek information from other professionals via online communications platforms, but patients seek information and welcome connecting with HCPs via social media. Patients also use social media when seeking to develop relationships with their HCPs. Data from surveys conducted by the American Academy of Family Physicians show 54% of millennials and 42% of all adults are connecting or would like to connect with their HCP on social media.<sup>ii</sup>

Partnering with influencers helps raise awareness about conditions, symptoms, research, treatment options, specific products, health policy, and advocacy groups. Some HCPs began using social media and online communications platforms to counter misinformation.<sup>iii</sup> Preserving the integrity of these platforms in a highly regulated industry requires stringent vetting of engagements with pharmaceutical and medical device companies. Life sciences companies should use the same level of examination to identify and select potential influencers.



## IDENTIFYING INFLUENCERS

Among the many considerations for qualifying healthcare influencers, at a high level, it is about who is creating and sharing content, the subject matter of the content being shared, and the venues where engagement with that content occurs.

Importantly, brands and medical affairs organizations must focus on the appropriate stakeholders online, just as they do in the analog world. An effective methodology includes first looking at a larger pool by conversation topic, using advanced analytics tools to drill down and see who is driving the conversation, and then segmenting those stakeholders who are relevant to the brand or medical affairs team.

Some teams focus on looking at traditional TLs who are also influential in the digital realm. But many teams conclude that this approach is myopic and expand their focus to include HCPs bringing in key digital influencers from primary care, allied HCPs (eg, NPs, PAs, pharmacists, health educators), and medical researchers; others still engage in scientific exchange with healthcare journalists. Once a brand or medical affairs group decides on the right types of digital stakeholders to engage, it is important to apply more research parameters to add only the most relevant stakeholders. This may include looking through the lens of a particular disease state within a specific geography. Additionally, some level of qualification is required from more traditional areas of thought leadership, such as the publications and professional association leadership participation of a DOL. Just as key factors determine traditional thought leadership, they provide an impactful foundation on digital channels. With some level of recognition offline, their conversation engagement may hold more sway online.

While a brand or medical affairs team may opt to focus on individual HCPs and researchers using digital options, to realize omnichannel engagement of key influencers, they also may opt for a pan-stakeholder approach. This approach could include other individuals (eg, healthcare journalists, patient advocates), as well as a wide variety of institutional stakeholders ranging from hospitals, health systems, and clinics to professional associations and societies, patient advocacy groups, and health plans. In most therapeutic areas with any scale of online conversation, each of these stakeholder groups—both individual and institutional—can play a key role in shaping an online therapeutic space in specific markets.

The final step in the identification, segmentation, and subsequent vetting of digital stakeholders includes validating their willingness to engage and their preferences for doing so. Just as with traditional TLs, some DOLs prefer not to engage with industry (or do so on a limited basis). Since the history of online engagement in healthcare is relatively young (less than ten years), many influencers continue evaluating what they would like to accomplish online. While their preferences may often be self-evident by where they participate (DOLs are rarely omnipresent), it is a best practice to validate these preferences and uncover new frontiers for engagement. For example, if a DOL is an avid Twitter or Reddit user, the DOL may be looking to a video-centric medium like YouTube to expand avenues of expression.

The topics and venues for engagement also will determine the shape of the DOL's influence. Specifically, an influencer may have a large following on social media, making them likely to engage not only with other healthcare stakeholders, but with patients and the general public as well. Brands should not be surprised to see digital micro-influencers or those who may have small, yet important, groups of followers. A specialty physician engaging on topics of relevance to the

company with an online following of hundreds of other specialists and healthcare institutions could have a greater return on digital investment versus a DOL with a larger, but less-targeted, following.

## **INFLUENCING THE INFLUENCER**

After identifying influencers, brands must determine and define the success factors of how to engage either individually or as a group. Influencers carefully curate their personal brands around their passion and build community by sharing resonant, relevant, and timely information. Working with influencers requires building trust, authenticity, transparency, and a collaborative goal-setting approach to optimize the engagement.

Successfully engaging with influencers involves sustained efforts to build and maintain these relationships; partnerships need to go beyond branded promotion. Collaboratively strategize with influencers to identify plans for disease education, research, clinical trials, patient support, and other patient- or HCP-focused projects. These relationships should not be viewed as tactics; they necessitate ongoing investment in the partnership for greater integration into existing strategies and continual alignment.

Maximizing influencer relationships entails understanding the complexities and fluctuations of social media and online communications platforms alongside pharmaceutical and medical device regulations. Through the collaboration between FORCE Communications and Thought Leader Select (TLS), our expertise in this area helps leverage influencers and ensure productive engagement. Respect for influencers fosters accountability and empowers effective advocacy, ultimately improving business credibility.

Expert influencer optimization is far more than tactical execution since the approach can impact how motivated KOLs and influencers are to provide feedback that validates evidence or highlights gaps. This approach enhances evidence and core story credibility. The influencer engagement optimization model, while simple in vision, is complex in execution:

- Strategic planning and the capability to map insights that embrace personal preferences throughout the product life cycle
- Tailored personalized engagement that reinforces respect and caring
- Continued touchpoints to ensure strategic alignment
- Development quality, relevant and memorable content, and innovative engagement as the foundation of a successful collaborative partnership between faculty and industry; this partnership is the ultimate objective that enhances feedback, respect, and trust

## CREATING EFFECTIVE CONTENT

After finding the right influencer, building the relationship, and aligning on strategy, it is critical to the success of the engagement to create content that resonates with the community. FORCE and TLS continually seek influencer collaboration through the content creation phase. Experts who feel they have been respectfully consulted with tend to proactively engage frequently and genuinely.

FORCE and TLS anticipate the needs of influencers by directly correlating credibility, respect, and trust, which leads to genuine insights. Combining existing ideas and concepts, even if not directly related to the product, allows influencers to pursue their passions beyond business activity. Collaborating on related

activities, such as working groups and philanthropic endeavors, helps to advance science, fulfill patient needs, and benefit the partnership.

Solid content enables expert influencer optimization to thrive. The quality and relevance of the content, especially content rooted in evidence, provide credibility and drive participation. The applicability to practice enhances the utility, while patient application enhances compassionate connectivity.

As with all good content, the goal is to connect, inform, educate, and engage the influencer and their community. Creating regulated life sciences content for social media and digital communications requires an extra level of rigor through monitoring of the community's conversations. FORCE and TLS stay involved in the discussion to anticipate the best next direction for content.

Community reaction overlaid with behavior drives the content direction and requires constant monitoring, influencer alignment, and a willingness to apply feedback to the next iteration of content. With approvals often required by life sciences companies for messaging and the real-time aspect of social media, evolving relevant content involves observation and continual adjustments.

## **ENSURING RETURN ON EFFORT**

Specific and achievable goals set collaboratively with the influencer early in the relationship will require tracking metrics to ensure return on investment. Social media and online communications platforms define and measure metrics differently. This space entails an ongoing understanding of the distinct definitions between platforms. An engagement on one platform can be a much different experience on another.

Similarly, unique platform measurements create challenges when comparing engagement across channels. Consider the different measurements specific to

the platform. When engaging multiple influencers, goals may differ for each depending on the primary platform used to connect to their respective community.

It is important to use the most advanced tools, especially those with robust artificial intelligence (AI), for digital listening and monitoring. Robust AI-powered tracking platforms are now defining this space due to the proliferation of data points in digital platforms. In a typical therapeutic area, there can be millions of conversations taking place each day among thousands of relevant stakeholders across the global communications platform of the World Wide Web. The best among these tools, such as Brandwatch, can use AI to sort through these millions of conversations not only for relevance, but also to analyze sentiment and even whether a stakeholder mirrors scientific messaging aligned with a particular company.

## **A FINAL WORD ON ENGAGEMENT**

Encourage and welcome suggestions from your influencer to improve engagement. Credible engagement is rooted in meaningful dialogue that can drive business value while enhancing the status of a company as a partner of choice.

Life sciences influencers will continue to be an essential component of a brand's omnichannel strategy. As social media and online communications evolve, partner with an organization that understands the complexity, nuances, and importance of access to information, conversation, and connection.

- i. McKinsey's Archetype segmentation model & Across Health Navigator

- ii. <https://www.aafp.org/news/practice-professional-issues/20180608commsurveys.html>
- iii. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4103576/>